



BLM ALASKA FRONTIERS

Issue 112 • Winter 2010

News about BLM's National System of Public Lands in Alaska

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Winter Biking— A Possibly Crazy Alaska Tradition

Seth Beaudreault

Early on Sunday, Mar. 27, about 65 intrepid souls will cross the starting line of the second White Mountains 100, a 100-mile human-powered endurance race that loops over the ridges and through the valleys of the one-million-acre White Mountains National Recreation Area north of Fairbanks. The BLM issues a permit for this race event.

Roughly a third of the racers – those not skiing or running – will be on bicycles. Bikes are a conveyance not often associated with winter transportation in Alaska, but for more than 100 years, bicycles have held a steady, though unheralded, role in how Alaskans move across snow and ice.

The White Mountain 100 race's co-founder, Ed Plumb, said that when he and Ann Farris decided to establish a new human-powered endurance race in the Interior, it seemed natural to include bicyclists. "We just wanted to include as many people as possible," Plumb explains.

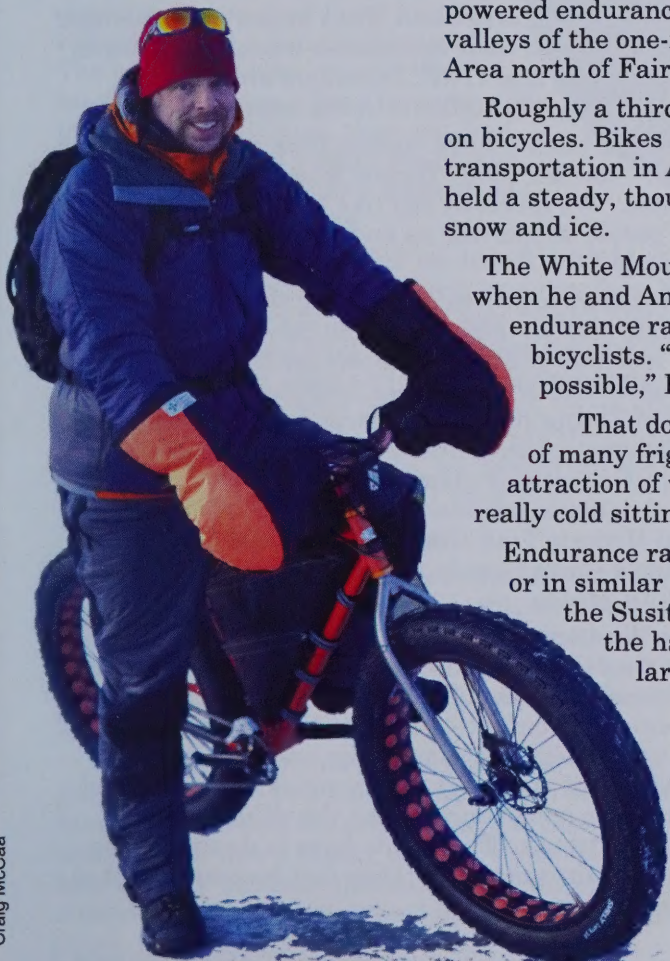
That doesn't mean that Plumb, an avid skier and veteran of many frigid backcountry ski trips, necessarily sees the attraction of winter biking himself. "It seems like it would be really cold sitting on a bike," he says with a laugh.

Endurance racers who participate in Plumb and Farris' race – or in similar Alaska races like the Iditarod Trail Invitational, the Susitna 100, and the Sheep Mountain 150 – represent the hard-core fringe of a winter biking scene that today largely focuses on recreation and fitness.

What most people don't know is that the bicycle's roots in Alaska date back at least as far as the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897. That year brought thousands of gold seekers to Alaska soon after a bicycling craze hit the nation. Some of those newcomers saw packed winter trails left by dogs, horses, and foot traffic, and thought, "Why couldn't we ride bicycles on those trails?"

Soon "wheels," as many people called bicycles at the time, and their riders, were riding the trails across Alaska and the Yukon.

—continued on page 4



Today's winter bicyclists benefit from specialized gear, including bicycle frames that fit oversized tires for riding through deep or soft snow.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Trail Teachers Set a New Course



Fifteen teachers along the Iditarod National Historic Trail from Seward to Nome are setting a new course for K-12 education in Alaska. They are the first class of the accredited year-long Iditarod Trail to Every Classroom or iTREC! teacher-training initiative co-sponsored by the BLM Anchorage Field Office, Chugach National Forest and Iditarod Historic Trail Alliance, Alaska Geographic, Iditarod Trail Committee, and National Park Service.

The iTREC! initiative uses a place-based, service learning approach modeled after the “Forest for Every Classroom” and the Appalachian Trail “Trail to Every Classroom” programs. iTREC! helps teachers connect their students to the natural and cultural heritage of their place along the Iditarod National Historic Trail. It also engages students in projects that help their communities. The program brings students outside of their classrooms and into the outdoors, fosters an understanding of their local landscape and community,

and inspires them to become long-term stewards of our natural and cultural resources.

At the first iTREC! summer institute in Girdwood from Aug. 1-5, 2010, teachers received intensive training on place-based service learning and curriculum development. Through hands-on sessions, they learned a variety of activities they could do later with their students. They also met with iTREC! partners to brainstorm potential service project ideas and support needs. Unlike most professional development opportunities, iTREC! teachers use their knowledge and experience with their students and communities to develop their own curriculum. They began implementing their curriculum in their classrooms when school began in the fall. These first iTREC! teachers are already engaging some 1,000 students in the approach.

iTREC! is “such a stark change from normal teacher training...” teacher Molly Hickox from Girdwood K-8 School said. “We all really felt like there was a huge team of people supporting us and expecting us to do great things.”

The teachers are already realizing that expectation. At a second session in Seward from Nov. 5-7, the iTREC! teachers gathered to report on their projects. Their classes had adopted trees, improved trails, begun monitoring streams, replaced invasive species with indigenous plants, and documented historic buildings. One class is planning to create public service announcements to increase awareness of the Iditarod National Historic Trail this summer, while another is creating a worm farm to manufacture soil for a community garden.

Luise Woelflein, BLM’s iTREC! coordinator, explains that the value for the children involved in the iTREC! program is that they learn curricula content in a meaningful context—a context that deepens their connection to their own community and to something larger (the Trail and other communities along it)—and gives them the opportunity to see the value of what they can contribute. “These kids have to do something to improve their community; they just become vested in what they’re doing.”



Damon Hampel, in the federal Student Temporary Employment Program, holds a carton of natural items as teachers try to figure out which categories they fit into.

(Title photo) A group of teachers act out a poem for the rest of the group as a part of the workshop’s tree-related poetry activity.

—continued on page 3

iTREC! —continued from page 2

iTREC!'s inaugural class will attend their final workshop in Nome on April 15-16. Next summer, the iTREC! partnership will host a new group of teachers from more schools along the Iditarod National Historic Trail.

For this first group of trailblazing teachers, iTREC! has transformed

their teaching approach. They see enthusiasm for place-based service learning growing in their schools and communities.

"It is really thrilling to be in on the very beginning of something that is sure to have a tremendous positive impact on many teachers, students, and community members," says fifth grade teacher Barbara Johnson from Tanaina Elementary School

in Wasilla. "I feel as if we are a small snowball rolling down a giant mountain, gaining more and more momentum along the way."

For more information on iTREC! or to apply for upcoming school years, contact Luise Woelflein (luise_woelflein@blm.gov).

— Jennifer Noe,
jennifernoe@blm.gov

Crew Saves Historic Steele Creek Roadhouse

Editor's Note: This is a first-person follow-up story to BLM-Alaska Frontiers articles, the "Steele Creek Roadhouse Stands Tall Again" (issue 108) and "Reroofing the Kink Cabin" (issue 111).

Having notched and placed the last new log, our joint BLM-Forest Service crew was ready to straighten the historic Steele Creek roadhouse during our restoration project. Anxiously, we watched the Fortymile Wild and Scenic River keep rising. Some of our camp had already relocated their tents and tools. Our concerned crew chief Doug Smith, rallied us with a call for "Shovels!" The roadhouse was in peril! We hustled to fashion a flood berm to protect the roadhouse, then watched in disbelief, as the historic roadhouse quickly became an island of the flood-ravaged Fortymile River.

Our project began earlier on July 6, with blisteringly hot, sunny days, and a jovial grin on every face. While two teams notched replacement logs for the historic roadhouse's rotting foundation, others stacked cribbing and placed screw jacks and support beams inside. A latticework of winching devices we call "come-alongs" secured two-story-tall beams to provide structural support. To the buzzing saws, we passed our days working in sun-soaked Steele Creek.

That is, until the rains came.

The rain trouble began late Saturday evening on July 10 as we turned in for the night, with only a sprits tapping on our tent rain flies. The tapping became a major deluge, raining all that night and steadily through Sunday, with over three inches falling in a 24-hour period.

Despite the rain, our work continued. Against heavy gray clouds, the crew's smiles were even brighter. As Sunday ended and the rain slackened, Steele Creek transformed into a raging torrent. From our tents, we heard heavy boulders thudding down the creek bed outside. Floating trees passed by in clumps. Beyond the creek, the Fortymile was a raging river of mud.



Monday, July 12, dawned sunny and warm, although some of us woke with water in our tents. We found eighteen inches of water filling the Steele Creek roadhouse as the flooding continued. Our project leader, Robin Mills, left to find phone reception to discover what was happening.

When Mills returned, his words were somber — "We could be here a long time." Flooding had washed out parts of the Taylor Highway from mileposts 67 to 160, prompting the Alaska Department of Transportation to declare the highway impassible and closed, including the milepost 95 junction with Canada's Top of the World Highway. The 160-mile mostly gravel road runs from the Alaska Highway near Tok to the Yukon River village of Eagle. The flooding river stranded campers at BLM's Walker Fork and West Fork campgrounds. We found ourselves stranded at the Steele Creek Roadhouse.

By that afternoon, the waters finally began to recede. We later learned the Fortymile River crested at a record depth of 94.54 feet at the Taylor Highway Bridge — the highest ever recorded.

On Tuesday, crew chief Doug Smith decided that the roadhouse needed time to dry. Rather than stop working, Mills led a crew to Steele Creek's only remaining unrestored historic cabin to remove its rotted lower logs or notch new logs for next summer's project.

Our last full day of work at Steele Creek on July 15 was long and dirty. Mud from the receding floodwaters covered us as we righted the leaning roadhouse. Using jacks of all sorts, we used the come-alongs to lift, pull, and straighten the building. Once straight, we piled rocks from Steele Creek to form a new foundation for the roadhouse. We left for Fairbanks on Friday, July 16, after thirteen days of work.

This is one restoration project none of us will ever forget.

— Nicklaus Moser
BLM Summer Seasonal Worker

Photo shows waters flooding the Steele Creek Roadhouse while cables keep it upright. Photo by Nicklaus Moser.

Winter Biking

Where to go:

With 240 miles of groomed trails, winter biking in the White Mountains National Recreation Area is limited only by your fitness, gear, and time. For a mellow introduction, ride seven miles into Lees Cabin on the Wickersham Creek Trail, which leaves from milepost 28 Elliott Highway. This well-used route, which follows a ridge top with only a few hills, is free of the creek crossings and overflow ice that can make for challenging conditions on other White Mountains trails.

Late in the season, when temperatures warm, the Colorado Creek Cabin makes for another fairly easy overnight destination. The cabin is 14 miles from the trailhead at milepost 57 Elliott Highway.

What you need:

Under good conditions, winter bicycling requires little more than a well-maintained mountain bike and the proper clothing. In loose or deeper snow, extra-wide rims and tires, together with lower tire pressure, keep your wheels from sinking in as far, allowing you to ride more easily. Some winter bicyclists take this a step farther by using custom bike frames that allow them to mount special tires nearly as wide as those on off-road motorcycles. Studded bike tires make traversing icy patches much safer.

Many riders use pogies, oversized mittens that fit over your handlebars, while others prefer warm mittens or gloves. Battery-powered headlights allow motorists to see you in the dark and let you see down the trail during the long winter nights.

Riding in cold temperatures also requires a few modifications to your bike's components, including lubricants that don't stiffen as much in the cold. A bicycle shop can help you prepare your bike.

Lastly, you'll want to carry emergency gear and tools, and for longer trips, food, clothing and equipment for an overnight stay. For this you'll need a small pack, bike bag or panniers.



Jeff Oatley, winner of last year's White Mountains 100 Race, leads the race across frozen Fossil Creek, approximately 42 miles from the finish.

In "Wheels on Ice: Bicycling in Alaska, 1898-1908," historian Terrence Cole noted the advantages of bicycles in those days. Long before the invention of snowmachines, bicycles were relatively inexpensive, sturdy, and easy to repair. And, at the end of a long and tiring day of travel, there were no sled dogs or horses to feed and care for.

“What the h--- are you going to do with the wheel, he asked. Going to Nome, I said. He called Harry Smith and John Nelson, proprietors of the hotel, and some other oldtimers. He said this brother of mine is going to try to go to Nome on a bicycle. He's crazy, they all said. We will have to put him on the wood-pile until he comes out of it.”

— Reaction of Edward R. Jesson's brother and friends when learning he intended to ride a bicycle from Dawson to Nome during the winter of 1900. From Terrence Cole's "Wheels on Ice: Bicycling in Alaska, 1898-1908."

Under the right conditions, a bicycle was a fast way to cover ground during Alaska winters. Gold Rush-era bicycle riders often outpaced dog teams on the trail. In good weather, bicyclists could easily ride between the roadhouses on major winter trails in a day.

Today, with more advanced equipment, bicycling remains much faster than other human-powered options – at least on a well-packed trail. In last year's White Mountains 100 endurance race, conditions favored the bikers, who grabbed the top six places before the first skier finished the course. The winner, Jeff Oatley of Fairbanks, powered his bike at an average pace of slightly over eight miles per hour over a 100-mile course, with nearly 8,000 feet of elevation gain.

Oatley says the speed and efficiency of winter biking – plus a lifelong love of riding bicycles – is a large part of what draws him to the sport.

“I ski a little bit, but pretty much only if I know the trail will be so soft that riding will not be possible,” Oatley says. “That's pretty rare around here. I think the advancement of 'snow bikes' over the last 10 years or so has made it so

that biking is the more efficient option most of the time in the Interior. If you're on a trail that has been put in by a snowmachine (and set up at all) a bike is a faster way to travel."

Klondike-era "wheels," considered technological marvels in their day, were a far cry from modern performance bikes, with their titanium frames, disc brakes, and hi-tech lubricants. Yet the frontier wheelmen, for whom the bicycle held pragmatic appeal as a useful means of winter transportation, would find much in common with another group of winter bikers – those Alaskans who commute by bicycle year-round.

The appeals of winter bike commuting – whether it's the calories burned or the gasoline saved – have never captivated large numbers of the state's residents, but every sizeable community in Alaska probably has at least a few diehards who refuse to put their bikes away when the snow starts falling. In Fairbanks, bicyclists' blinking tail lights can be seen flashing through the ice fog even when it's 20 or 30 degrees F. below zero.

Whether they do it for commuting or recreation, those who choose to ride bicycles through Alaska winters must contend with frequent questions about their sanity. But a two-hour trail ride or a 30-minute commute at 10 below zero doesn't seem nearly as extreme when you consider what it must have been like to ride over a thousand miles from Dawson to Nome on a single-speed bike such as Edward Jesson – and at least three other men – did during the winter of 1900. Then again, everyone thought Jesson was crazy.

— Craig McCaa
Craig_McCaa@blm.gov

Visit the White Mountains National Recreation Area at
http://www.blm.gov/ak/white_mtns or pick up a White Mountains National Recreation Area brochure from a BLM office.



Biking to Fairbanks through the Teikhell Canyon in the early 1900s.

Phinney S. Hunt, Alaska Museum at Rasmusen Center

"The downhill runs were like the best kind of mountain biking, smooth and flowing with a few blissful "big airs" over the snowmobile moguls. . . . The trail itself spiraled downward, winding through the spruce forest on tight and challenging winter 'singletrack.' It, like most of the rest of the course, was truly fun biking, the kind that makes you wonder why everyone doesn't just go out and buy a fat bike and move to Fairbanks. But then I'd hit another open area of overflow, and the cold wind would needle into my skin, and I'd remember that, oh yeah, this is Alaska — a hard place that doesn't easily forgive complacency."

— 2010 White Mountains 100 participant Jill Homer, from her blog "Jill Outside" (arcticglass.blogspot.com)



Craig McCaa

A throng of bikers are first to cross the starting line of the inaugural White Mountains 100 Race on March 21, 2010.

A Cautionary Tale: Riding on Packing Peanuts into Alaska's White Mountains

Craig McCaa

Normally I'd be thrilled to arrive at a White Mountains National Recreation Area trailhead and find that a few inches of fresh snow had fallen the night before. This time, however, the new snow meant a long and tiring winter day ahead. My friend Seth and I planned to ride our bikes 20 miles to our reserved public-use cabin. I had enticed Seth to come on this trip by raving about an earlier White Mountains winter bike ride that my wife and I did a few years ago in ideal winter conditions.

A little loose snow on the trail would not challenge riders who train for the White Mountains 100 and other endurance winter biking races, but for our regular mountain bikes, the trip quickly devolved into churning back wheels and bucking handlebars. Seth compared it to riding on foam packing peanuts. We'd fishtail down the trail for a while, then stop to pant or walk.

"Seems like riding is twice as

fast, but four times as much work," Seth observed. I couldn't argue with that. We walked some more.

The packing peanuts-type snow was nothing like my earlier mountain biking trip 14 miles into Colorado Creek Cabin on a firm, well-groomed trail right up to the cabin door. That trip was easier riding than many dirt roads I've explored. Those conditions were so fast – and so easy – that we periodically stopped just to give our dog a chance to catch his breath.

Then we tried riding a section of the Big Bend Trail behind the cabin, and found the much less-traveled trail had drifted over and never set up firmly. After 50 or 100 feet, one of our wheels would punch through the crust, sometimes all the way to the hub. We quickly abandoned our efforts and returned to the cabin for hot chocolate.

Thus my cautionary tale. The lesson of these trips applies to all winter travelers – whether

on bicycles, skis, snowmachines, snowshoes or simply walking: Always prepare for changing conditions, especially in Alaska.

— Craig McCaa
Craig_McCaa@blm.gov



Jeff Oatley

(Top) Seth Beaudreault walks his bike uphill through new snow on the Wickersham Creek Trail in the White Mountains National Recreation Area. (right) Winter cyclists take a break at the White Mountains trail junction.

Winter Trails Day 2011 at BLM's Campbell Tract, Anchorage

Mark your calendars! Join more than 1,000 visitors of all ages for this annual program on winter recreation and trails on Feb. 12, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (last gear checkout is 3:30 p.m.).

Find out more at <http://www.blm.gov/ak/sciencecenter/>

Thom Jennings



FRONTIERS *Flashes*

News from around Alaska

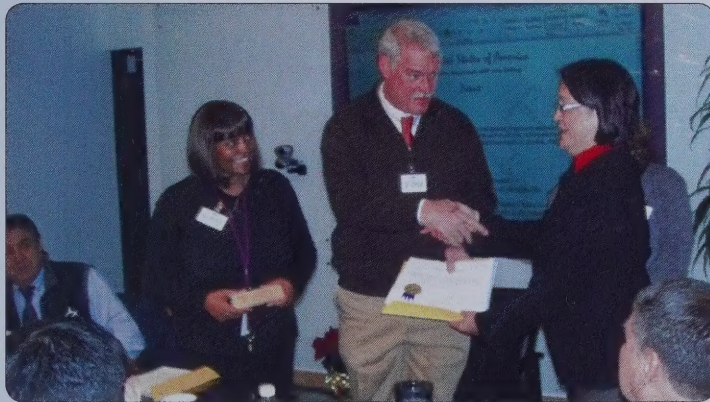


The Campbell Creek Science Center is now on Twitter!

Follow us for up-to-date messages on upcoming programs, events, and more.
<http://twitter.com/BLMCCSC>

Native Village of Afognak land patent

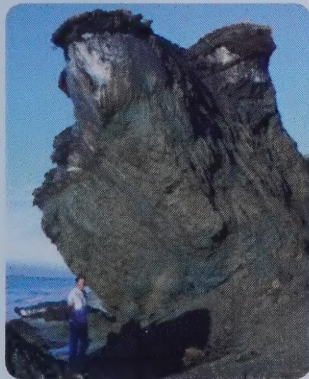
BLM-Alaska's new State Director, Bud Cribley, signed his very first Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) land conveyance patent on Dec. 17. The patent completes the ANCSA land conveyances to Afognak Native Corporation for the Native Village of Afognak.



Ralph Eluska

(Left to right): (sitting down) Lands & Natural Resources Manager Chuck Reft, Koniag, Inc.; Land Law Examiner Eileen Ford, BLM; Alaska State Director Bud Cribley; and President and CEO Richard Hobbs, Afognak.

Arctic Field Office archaeologist publishes Alaska climate change research



Ken Dunton

A block of permafrost on a beach shows the signs of extreme coastal erosion.

Archaeologist Michael Kunz co-authored "Floodplains, permafrost, cottonwood trees and peat: What happened the last time the climate warmed suddenly in arctic Alaska?" published December 2010 in *Quaternary Science Reviews*. The study uses stratigraphy and radiocarbon dating methods to describe rates and timing of land elevation from sediment deposits over the last 16,000 years in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska. A scientific poster about the study was presented at the 2010 American Geophysical

Union annual meeting, in San Francisco. More than 18,400 geophysicists gathered from around the world to present and review the latest issues in geophysical sciences affecting the Earth, the planets, and their environments in space.

Be a volunteer campground host



Chad Cook

Some lucky people spend summers in Alaska working at scenic campgrounds and greeting tourists from around the world. This is the time of year to make it happen. Volunteer hosts work at federal campgrounds such as Brushkana Creek along the Denali Highway at milepost 104 near Cantwell. Volunteer campground hosts work from mid-May through mid-September, with 10 days on duty and four days off. For information or to apply, please call the BLM Glennallen Field Office at (907) 822-3217 or visit http://www.blm.gov/ak/st/en/fo/gdo/volunteer_recognitions.html

Science Center Friends provide scholarships

In 2010, the Friends of the Campbell Creek Science Center raised \$77,258. Much of this funding goes to program fees for economically disadvantaged youth. Most recently, AngloAmerican, one of the world's largest mining companies, donated \$15,000 to the Friends group for scholarships. The Carr Foundation also recently contributed \$1,500 to the group. Since it began in 2005, the Friends group has raised \$236,572 for the science center. Joette Storm, the Friend's president, received the Public Lands Foundation 2010 Landscape Stewardship Certificate of Appreciation. For more information, visit <http://www.blm.gov/ak/sciencecenter>



BLM Campbell Creek Science Center

Summer Jobs 2011

BLM-Alaska has a variety of seasonal jobs for students age 18 to 26. Application deadlines vary. To apply, contact the field office where you want to work. Glennallen Field Office (907) 822-3217; Anchorage Field Office (907) 267-1246; Alaska Fire Service (Fort Wainwright) (907) 356-5511. Alaska Fire Service jobs run from mid-May to mid-August and the deadline is April 1. Visit <http://fire.ak.blm.gov/afs/fireops/northstars.php> or <http://fire.ak.blm.gov/afs/fireops/hotshots.php>.



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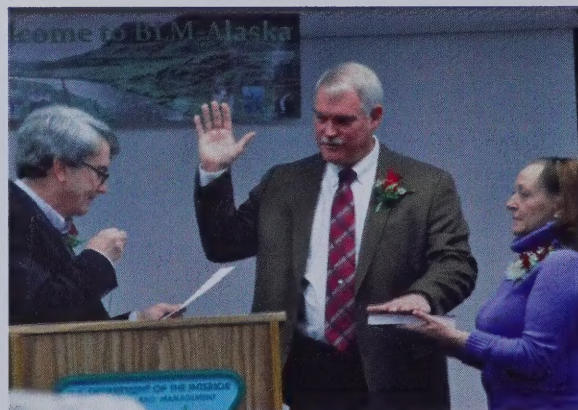
BLM-ALASKA FRONTIERS... From the Managing Editor

On Dec. 1, BLM Director Bob Abbey installed our new State Director, Bud Cribley. It feels like a new beginning, not only for Cribley, but also for BLM-Alaska. Our State Director has spent his first weeks learning all he can about BLM-Alaska. He is also visiting the Glennallen Field Office, Fairbanks District Office and Alaska Fire Service.

This issue features winter biking, with stories and photos from Craig McCaa, Fairbanks District Writer-Editor. Also check out what Iditarod Trail teachers are doing, summer job opportunities, and more.

One of the difficult jobs of a managing editor for a news publication is when a story becomes part of us personally. That happened with our Alaska Smokejumpers Make-a-Wish story about 10-year-old Jedidiah Lusk in our last issue of *Frontiers*. I followed a daily online journal written by Jedidiah's family. On Jan. 3, Jedidiah lost his 10-month battle with cancer, and I cried. <http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/jedidiahlusk>

— Karen J. Laubenstein
karen_laubenstein@blm.gov



(Left to right) BLM Director Bob Abbey swears-in Bud C. Cribley as Alaska State Director while Mrs. Cribley holds the Bible.

Ronald Laubenstein

BLM-Alaska Frontiers

Managing editor

Karen J. Laubenstein, (907) 271-3318
karen_laubenstein@blm.gov

Contributing writers and editors

Craig McCaa
Jennifer Noe
Nicklaus Moser

Photographers

Campbell Creek Science Center	Nicklaus Moser
Chad Cook	Phinney Hunt
Craig McCaa	Ralph Eluska
Luise Woelflein	Ronald Laubenstein
Jeff Oatley	Seth Beaudreault
Ken Dunton	Thom Jennings

Design/Illustration

Vanessa Rathbun

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